

Missions in the age of the Spirit

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LOGION
P R E S S

Springfield, Missouri
02-0464

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Logion Press books are published by Gospel Publishing House.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

York, John V., 1944–

Missions in the age of the spirit / John V. York; Stanley M. Horton, general editor.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-88243-464-0 (pbk.)

1. Missions—Theory—Biblical teaching. 2. Missions—Biblical teaching. 3. Assemblies of God—Doctrines.

I. Horton, Stanley M. II. Title.

BV2073.Y67 2000

266—dc21

00-035229

Printed in the United States of America

Chapter 3:

***Missio Dei* in the Gospels: Proclamation of a King**

In the Gospels, we glimpse the King himself modeling the character of His reign by living among His subjects on earth. The *missio Dei* motif developed in the Old Testament is now personified in the Messiah, Jesus, explained by His teaching, and further prophesied, in both direct statement and oblique parable.

Royal Passages

From the Old Testament, we learned that the mission of God was defined by the eternal kingdom promised to David (2 Sam. 7:16; 1 Chron. 17:12–14; Ps. 89:36–37). Further, a promised seed of Abraham was to bless all nations (Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; see also 26:4 and 28:14).

Therefore, it is highly significant that Matthew opens his Gospel with the statement, “A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham” (1:1). With this brief statement, Matthew invokes the memory of the eternal kingdom promised to David through which will be fulfilled the blessing of the nations promised to Abraham.

The rest of Matthew, and indeed the rest of the Gospels, builds upon this dual anticipation. First, the long-awaited kingdom has come in the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of David. Second, the long-awaited blessing of the nations is about to be realized through the authority and power of Jesus the Davidic King.

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Understanding this is the key to reading the Gospels as disclosures of the mission of God. Without “advance organizers” in the text such as Matthew 1:1, we would be left to our own devices in arranging what might appear to be something of a random accumulation of Jesus’ sayings and deeds.

Parables

A major function of the parables is to throw light upon this twin theme of kingdom and nations. Indeed, the usual introductory phrase of a parable is “‘The kingdom of heaven is like’” (Matt. 13:24). The parable then typically moves toward some expression of harvest or expansion. So what is the kingdom like? Let us look at a few examples.

It is like a farmer who sowed seed in several kinds of soil (Matt. 13:1–15, 18–23; Mark 4:3–20; Luke 8:4–15). Jesus’ interpretation of this parable begins with the statement, “‘The farmer sows the word’” (Mark 4:14). This statement connects the Testaments: Throughout the Old Testament period God had been known by His word. All who came into contact with the Lord in the Old Testament, whether Israelite or non-Israelite, did so through His word. The Old Testament narratives, law, wisdom literature, and prophetic discourse are all referred to in the New Testament as Scripture, or God’s Word (2 Tim. 3:16). As I have tried to show, that word had as its purpose statement the words spoken to Abraham: “‘All peoples on earth will be blessed through you’” (Gen. 12:3). The organizing principle of the Old Testament is the promise of a Seed through whom will come the eternal kingdom of God and the blessing of the nations.¹

The unceasing activity of the sower results in a thorough distribution of the seed upon all types of

¹Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), 39.

soil.² So when this message of Christ and the plan He represents is made known to humanity, the responses vary according to the types of soil mentioned in the parable. This parable is central to Jesus' teaching and hence to understanding the kingdom of God. It is placed at the beginning of three major parables in all three Synoptic Gospels. And Jesus asks: "'Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?'" (Mark 4:13).³

Two conclusions may be reached about the Parable of the Sower. First, harvest is central to the teaching of Jesus and to the kingdom of God. Far from being an accidental metaphor suggested by a rural environment, harvest is rather the heart of the nature of God. In the light of the entire teaching of the Old Testament, this harvest must include the spread of the gospel to all nations. The sowing of the seed represents a divine initiative breaking in upon the soil. The seed will be sown so that all may have the opportunity to be blessed regardless of their condition of receptivity. Second, the Word of God will always divide humanity into differing groups depending upon their reception of the message. It was so in Jesus' day, and it has remained so.

With this parable serving as a key, the parable of the weeds may be unlocked (Matt. 13:24–30,36–43). In stating that "'the field is the world'" (Matt. 13:38), Jesus is once again laying claim to all He created. False teaching is the result of illegal trespassers, and He will eventually gather its weeds and burn them, leaving His universal rule unchallenged. In this way, the ancient promise of a seed to bless all nations is finally and fully realized.

Or, the kingdom of heaven is known through the

²Walter W. Wessel, "Mark," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 9:648.

³R. Alan Cole, *Mark*, vol. 2 of *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, ed. Leon Morris (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), 149–50.

parable of the eleventh-hour laborers (Matt. 19:30 to 20:16). This parable is bracketed by the statement, “The last will be first, and the first will be last” (20:16; cf. 19:30). With the other parables already interpreted by Christ, the landowner is quickly seen to be Christ himself. He is the hero of the parable, diligently returning time and again throughout the day to call workers who will labor on the basis of trusting Him. After the entry of yet one more group of workers, who sadly had been idle all the day, the day finishes with a one-hour grand finale of work.

It is the Master’s question to this last group of workers that links the parable to Matthew 1:1 and *missio Dei*: “‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’” (20:6). Jesus Christ is indeed the son of both David and Abraham, and the time to extend His royal rule throughout all the nations has come. In such an atmosphere, failing to work for lack of a formal labor contract is petty, even unthinkable, thus the question, “Why?” Even more appalling is the attitude of the earlier laborers who ignore the glorious unfolding of *missio Dei*, choosing instead to regard the progress of divine grace throughout the world to be little more than a social experience and a meal ticket. Their attitude naturally gives rise to jealousy over the inclusion of “nonunion” workers when those workers are generously paid.

Several features of this parable should be noted. The first-hour workers are the only ones with a formal contract, the standard denarius per day. The return of the owner for more workers throughout the day is noteworthy and is consistent with his preoccupation with harvest and with the request for the disciples to pray for more laborers (Matt. 9:38). When Jesus promised to pay the later workers what was “‘right’” (Gk. *dikaion*, 20:4), He may have been suggesting His own righteousness.

That the last hour was the most successful seems

required by several factors at the conclusion of the story. First, the payment of a denarius for only one hour of work shows a change of the owner's demeanor. From the time the first workers were sent out until this point, the owner had refused to waste time discussing such mundane matters as finance. His whole preoccupation was on harvest with the understanding that his righteousness guaranteed fair treatment, and therefore there was neither time nor energy to be spent going over contracts. Now with harvest over, for the first time he relaxes and shows his pleasure by the generous payment of the later workers. The pleasure may have been brought about by the quantity they were able to harvest, by their ability to harvest where others had not succeeded, or perhaps by their sacrificial service in bringing about closure to the harvest process. In any case, the generous payment is deliberately highlighted by their being paid first.

When objections come from the earlier workers, Jesus uses a word for friend (Gk. *hetaire*, v. 13) used only here, of the guest without a wedding garment (Matt. 22:12), and of Judas Iscariot (Matt. 26:50). Like the older brother in another parable (Luke 15:11–32), they refused to join in the general rejoicing of that occasion, choosing rather to sulk in their supposed mistreatment. They were not really mistreated though, since they were paid all they had been promised. Rather, they simply identified themselves as being interested in their own welfare or in maintaining the status quo rather than in the interests of the owner or his harvest. In asking, “‘Are you envious because I am generous?’” (Matt. 20:15), the words of the owner are, literally, “I . . . I am” (Gk. *ego eimi*). This is the same construction used by Jesus in His seven “I am” statements in John, where they were understood to imply a claim to divinity. The same may be the case here. At the very least, they provide emphasis, that is, *I myself* am “good” (v. 15, KJV; Gk. *agathos*), probably spoken in contrast to the mean-

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ness of spirit with which the earlier workers were complaining.

The immediate setting of this parable gives keys to what it meant to those who first heard it. Children, though in many ways socially last, had just been made to be first (19:13–15). Then, the rich young man, though socially first, had just gone away last (19:16–30). Peter and the rest of the disciples had been shocked at Jesus' insistence that it is hard for the rich (the first) to enter heaven (19:24–25). Jesus had then promised a special place, when the Son of man sits on His glorious throne, for the twelve who had followed Him and for all others who similarly will forsake all and follow Him (19:28). So, these twelve would have identified themselves with the "last" of Jesus' parable (20:16). They may also have seen their role in following Jesus as insignificant in comparison with that of those earlier in the day—patriarchs like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, or King David, or one of the prophets. After all, they had brought no kingdom but just followed Jesus, without having any place to lay their head.

Moving to present application, the "last—first" principle that brackets the parable provides its main meaning and has application for all times. Historically, missions were long thought to be primarily the preserve of the propertied and politically powerful Western nations. More recently, the fast-growing churches of the Two-Thirds World have sent missionaries until they now form a majority of those presently serving. Some churches, however, have not yet entered meaningfully into missions, due to financial constraint or other reasons. Jesus' parable speaks to such churches, and to all who feel unable to go. Those who hear His voice and go will find an atmosphere of unbelievable success, despite persecutions, as they complete the eleventh-hour harvest. They will also find unbelievable reward when the harvest has been completed.

Other Gentile References

Aside from the parables, the dual theme of David's kingdom and the blessing of the nations is suggested by Gentile passages throughout the Gospels.

When the newborn Christ was presented in the temple, Simeon declared: "For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:30–32).

Simeon would have known the phrase "light to the Gentiles" from both Isaiah 42:6 and 49:6. The "all people" are composed of both Gentiles and Israelites, the glory shining as a light from Israel to the nations as had been prophesied for centuries.

It was wise men "from the east" who came to worship (Matt. 2:1; cf. 2:2–12), anticipating the day that many would come "from the east and the west" (Matt. 8:11).

It was a Gentile centurion whose faith was greater than that found in Israel (Matt. 8:10; Luke 7:9). This prompted Jesus to announce that the Kingdom would include Gentiles from around the world (Matt. 8:11). It was "a Canaanite woman" whose answer so touched Jesus that he referred to her great faith (Matt. 15:22; cf. v. 28). In one of Jesus' most famous parables, the unlikely hero was a Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37).

While the commission of Matthew 10 was for a Jewish mission in the immediate future, much of the chapter deals with the Gentile mission soon to follow. As an example of this, Jesus said the disciples should expect serious persecution that would result in testifying before governors, kings, and Gentiles (Matt. 10:17–18). But there is no evidence that this happened during the mission that immediately followed. Rather, this instruction looked beyond the immediate mission to Israel, toward the impending Gentile mission.

In denouncing Jewish cities that had not repented, Jesus stated that the judgment would be more bearable

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for the Gentile cities of Tyre, Sidon, and even Sodom than for them (Matt. 11:21–24).

Of the Gospel references to Isaiah 56:7, Mark alone quotes the end of the verse so as not to miss its Gentile focus: “And as he taught them, he said, ‘Is it not written: “My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations”? But you have made it “a den of robbers”’” (Mark 11:17; see also Matt. 21:12–13; Luke 19:45–46; John 2:13–17). These words are quoted in the context of Jesus’ cleansing of the court of the Gentiles at the Jewish temple. It was this area, reserved for Gentile worship, that had been preempted for commercial purposes. Jesus’ anger indicated displeasure against so blatant an affront to His intention that all nations should be blessed.

The vocabulary of the Gospel of John includes terms that anticipated a mission beyond Israel. The term “world” (Gk. *kosmos*) refers primarily to the inhabited earth and appears thirty-six times in twenty-seven verses within John. Other Greek words add a further forty-two occurrences of the English word “world.” Many of these references are missiologically significant. For example, John 1:9 states, “The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world” (Gk. *kosmos*). The two great points theologically in this verse are that Jesus was entering the world and that this entry was of significance to all people everywhere. John 1:10 adds to the weight of John 1:9 by stating that Jesus made the world: Though He would live in Israel, His redemptive mission was for the entire *kosmos*. In John 3:16–17, the word *kosmos* is used three times in describing the mission of the Son, sent by God to bring eternal life rather than “‘to condemn the world’” (v. 17; Gk. *kosmos*). The phrase “‘all men’” is used in a sense that would imply Gentiles in John 1:7 and 12:32. The term “whoever” is used six times in John’s Gospel in the traditional sense of persons of any origin.

Also within John, it was to a Samaritan woman that

Jesus gave a clear statement of messiahship (John 4:26). Jesus used this occasion to explain to His disciples, "My food . . . is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work" (John 4:34), for the fields were already "'ripe for harvest'" (John 4:35). On this same occasion, the Samaritans—recognizing that they, too, were included in the kingdom of God—exclaimed, "'We know that this man really is the Savior of the world'" (v. 42; Gk. *kosmos*). Indeed, Jesus had "'other sheep'" that would be included: "'There shall be one flock and one shepherd'" (John 10:16). "'All men,'" Jesus prophesied, would be drawn to Him when He was "'lifted up'" (i.e., on a cross, John 12:32).

In an unusual reference, the High Priest Caiaphas's prophecy of Jesus' death is interpreted by John to be for all peoples who, in turn, are made one: "Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, 'You know nothing at all! You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.' He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one" (John 11:49–52).

When Greeks attending a feast at Jerusalem requested an audience with Jesus, Jesus used the occasion to say that a kernel of wheat must die in order to produce "'many seeds'" (John 12:24). In this way, He was anticipating the benefit to the Gentiles resulting from His own death (John 12:20–26).

Significantly, John viewed the accomplishment of Christ's anticipated harvest as being accomplished through the convicting power of the Holy Spirit: "'When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the

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Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned' " (John 16:8–11).

Commission

The Great Commission passages that end each Gospel are the logical conclusion to the twin motifs of kingdom and nations (Matt. 28:18–20; Mark 16:15–18; Luke 24:46–49 together with Acts 1:8; John 20:21). As Isaiah had prophesied, the restoration of the Davidic kingdom was to usher in a day in which the Kingdom would be extended to Gentiles. The "Jewish only" era of the Kingdom would be unable to contain the glory of that greater day (Isa. 49:6).

The commission passages agree with the kingdom/nations motif in the following ways: First, the commission is given upon the basis of Christ's authority (Gk. *exousia*), a kingdom reference. It is the resurrected Christ who has full royal authority and thus moves quickly to include all His realm—the "'all nations'" of Matthew 28:19. All the subjects of Christ's kingdom must receive the royal announcement of the gospel (Mark 16:15); the word "'preach'" in Mark 16:15 may be used of the proclamation of a king (cf. NEB, "proclaim"). Further, "'all nations'" are to be disciplined and taught to observe all kingdom regulations, "'everything I have commanded you'" (Matt. 28:19–20; cf. Matt. 5 to 7). Baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19) implies both the mission of the triune God and an understanding of that mission on the part of those being baptized. All those who proceed to the nations as the King's ambassadors are first to receive a mighty empowerment of the King's own Spirit (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8).

Perhaps John records the most comprehensive kingdom meaning of the commission: "'As the Father has sent me, I am sending you'" (John 20:21). The Father had sent Jesus as the divine Son of David to bring

God's kingdom to earth. In this statement of transferred apostleship, Jesus squarely places His kingdom mission upon the shoulders of His apostles. As Jesus finished His mission of dying for the sins of the world, so the Church is commissioned to finish its mission of making disciples of all nations. As Jesus moved in the power of the Holy Spirit, so the disciples are to move in the power of the same Holy Spirit. As Jesus represented His Father's will with acts of compassion and attention to the oppressed, so must the Church be characterized by such acts. As Jesus prepared the Church for worldwide witness through eschatological statements, so the Church must use these prophetic discourses to mobilize itself to fulfill Christ's witness throughout the earth. As Jesus bypassed the power structures of His day by calling and empowering simple fishermen to be apostles, so the Church must retain a simple trust in God's power among ordinary people to accomplish everything God has willed.

If Christ's commission did not extend to all the nations of the Gentiles, then He would be more of a tribal chieftain than a king. It is the very essence of God's kingdom that it must be worldwide. Satan's quest to be like God has led to his continual attempt to gain recognition of his own kingdom; this was apparently one of his objectives in tempting Jesus. Bringing people from all nations to serve Christ deprives Satan's counterfeit kingdom of even the pretense of legitimacy. Any subtraction from believers among all peoples is thus the reduction of the essential nature of Christ's kingdom to the level of a counterfeit. For the Kingdom to be the Kingdom it must be composed of all nations. When the risen Jesus stated that all authority was given to Him, He was announcing to His followers that the time had come to claim all people groups as His legitimate kingdom inheritance (Matt. 28:18; cf. Ps. 2:8).

One further note: It has already been pointed out that John's Great Commission is in 20:21, "As the Father

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has sent me, I am sending you.'” This verse should be read as a sequel to 17:4: “‘I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.’” Since the Church is sent as Jesus was, and Jesus completed His assignment by going all the way to the cross, so the Church must finish its assigned task of preaching the gospel to all the world. How could it be otherwise?

Teaching

The ethical and moral teachings of Jesus should likewise be seen in the context of His kingdom. These teachings invite the hungry of the nations, the weary and heavy laden, to come to Jesus’ kingdom and find rest, protection, and purpose. The endless cycles of dehumanizing fear and the manipulation of spirits common to the Gentiles stand in stark contrast to the simple life of faith and honesty taught by Christ. The teachings of Christ represent the fulfillment of the Old Testament law and the perfection of Old Testament wisdom. If the Old Testament covenant community had a much better life than their neighbors, how much greater the difference is now between those whose lives truly reflect Christ’s kingdom and those whose lives tragically miss the mark. This difference serves as the validation of the gospel proclaimed by the Church.

Prophecy

The prophetic portions are likewise given as prior statements of the future scope and power of the Kingdom. Since the King will rule all nations, those in rebellion should quickly surrender to the divine King and be included as loyal subjects. Otherwise, they will be weeded out of His kingdom (Matt.13:41).

It should be noted that Jesus makes a strong correlation between the successful completion of His mission to all nations and the coming of the end. Matthew 24:14

reads, “ ‘And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.’ ” Mark 13:10 conveys the same thought: “ ‘And the gospel must first be preached to all nations.’ ”

A helpful note on Matthew 24:14 appears in the *Full Life Study Bible*: “Only God will know when this task is accomplished according to his purpose. The believer’s task is to faithfully and continually press on ‘to all nations’ till the Lord returns to take his church to heaven. . . . We must live in a tension between the imminency of Christ’s coming and the fact that Christ has commanded us to keep on spreading the gospel.”⁴

Unreached people groups indicate something incomplete rather than “ ‘the end’ ” (Gk. *telos*, “consummation”) that the Kingdom is headed for. The Church should address these gaps in completing the Kingdom so imperfection might be removed and the Kingdom’s destiny be completed. The Church has no choice but to continue to associate, as Jesus did, the geographical and ethnic expansion of the preaching of the gospel with the completion of its task (Matt. 24:14).

Those who have a holy longing for the realization of Christ’s kingdom are motivated to honor their king by extending His present rule to the most remote or most resistant portions of the earth. Prophecy as given by Jesus serves as the announcement that the mission will be successfully completed. It motivates His followers to offer themselves willingly in His service to accomplish His mission. In Jesus’ worldview, missions and eschatology were closely related.

⁴Donald C. Stamps, ed., *The Full Life Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 1454.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Explain from antecedent Scripture why Matthew 1:1 is viewed as an “advance organizer” to the remainder of the New Testament.
2. Why is the Parable of the Sower regarded as the key to understanding all Jesus’ parables? How does this understanding of this parable connect to the antecedent Scriptures of the Old Testament? What does it say concerning the mission of God in the New Testament era?
3. What message does Jesus’ parable of the eleventh-hour workers convey to those in our time who feel they may have been left out of participating in earth’s harvest drama?
4. Demonstrate from both the Synoptic Gospels and John’s Gospel that Christ viewed His mission as one to all nations.
5. Explain the Great Commission texts, which each Gospel closes with, in terms of their relationship to God’s ongoing mission within history.
6. Explain the statement, “In Jesus’ worldview, missions and eschatology were closely related.”